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Tales of Wonder - Science Fiction and Fantasy in the Age of Jane Austen

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Brian Aldiss; Arabian Nights; Jane Austen; Coleridge; Frankenstein; genre fiction; Gothic; Northanger Abbey; Otranto; Mrs. Radcliffe; Science Fiction; Mary Shelley; terror-romance; Horace Walpole

Tales of Wonder – Science Fiction and Fantasy in the Age of Jane Austen

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Keywords: Brian Aldiss, *Arabian Nights*, Jane Austen, Coleridge, *Frankenstein*, genre fiction, Gothic, *Northanger Abbey*, *Otranto*, Mrs. Radcliffe, Science Fiction, Mary Shelley, terror-romance, Horace Walpole

As Tolkien enthusiasts, we all find ourselves in a peculiar limbo between SF and mainstream literature. The gap is less than it used to be, but it is still there. And there are plenty of *literati* who would love to apply a bit of “ethnic cleansing” to us, if they had the power to do so.

Undeniably, Tolkien’s work does not belong to any recognised category. It is not a myth, not a joke, not SF, not a children’s story. It is closer to SF than anything else, but very different in origin. It offends tidy-minded critics, who see it as an escaped children’s story, badly needing to be expunged as a mistake of nature.

But how natural or valid are the standard categories? Do they represent fundamental rules that *The Lord of the Rings* improperly breaks? Or are they no more significant than the division of the files in a filing cabinet into *A to N* and *O to Z* (which was actually the origin of *The Marvelous Land of OZ*).

The received-standards view is that Science Fiction is an outgrowth of Gothic Terror, with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as the connecting link (see figure 1).

This view is commonly associated with Mr. Brian Aldiss, who argued the case in 1973 in his *Billion Year Spree*. It actually goes back at least as far as 1907 and has been expressed by a large number of writers, including Muriel Spark in her 1951 biography of Mary Shelley. And also it’s wrong.

The first thing to understand is that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is not at all like the film and television versions of the myth. Mary’s creature is highly intelligent, articulate and well-educated. He starts off full of benevolence, tries to do good, and only gradually turns to evil in the face of human rejection. The creature is not made of reconnected bits of miscellaneous dead bodies, and no mention is made in the text of electricity being the animating force. Victor Frankenstein is on one occasion described as working by the light of a candle. He is neither a baron nor a

doctor, nor even a medical student.

Most of the familiar images come from the very remarkable and memorable 1931 film, which used or even invented many of the standard stock images of cinema science fiction, none of which are actually present in Mary Shelley’s work. The 1931 American film has an understandable similarity to the early American SF of the same period. But all of these similarities are innovations, not found in the original.

The SF of Gernsback and Campbell derives from H.G. Wells, who in turn speaks of his “early, profound and lifelong admiration for Swift”. Early SF, most SF up until the “New Wave” of the 1960s, has much in common with what is usually called the Augustan group of writers, Smollett, Goldsmith, Richardson, Sterne, Swift, and Defoe. Mary Shelley’s work is something very different, an early example of the nineteenth-century romantic novel.

Quite apart from this, we have an odd situation if we uncritically accept the standard view. We have the Augustan Writers, all male and all very much products of the Age of Reason. Then we have female writers, expressing the vision of the Romantic Movement in novels. Between these two we have a group of men and women whose work includes both of these elements. The standard view classes them as “Gothic Fiction” and the “Novel of Doctrine”. Gothic at least is said to have nothing to do with the development of proper literature. Yet all of these writers are intermediate in style and in ideas, as well as chronologically.

Figure 2 shows how the writers are conventionally grouped. Now let’s look at the known influences.

The Gothic novel, as normally defined, begins in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Story*. Some reference works say 1765, which was the date printed on the first edition, but it is well established that it first went on sale in 1764. This first edition consisted of 500 copies, which was a fairly standard print run for those times. It sold well and

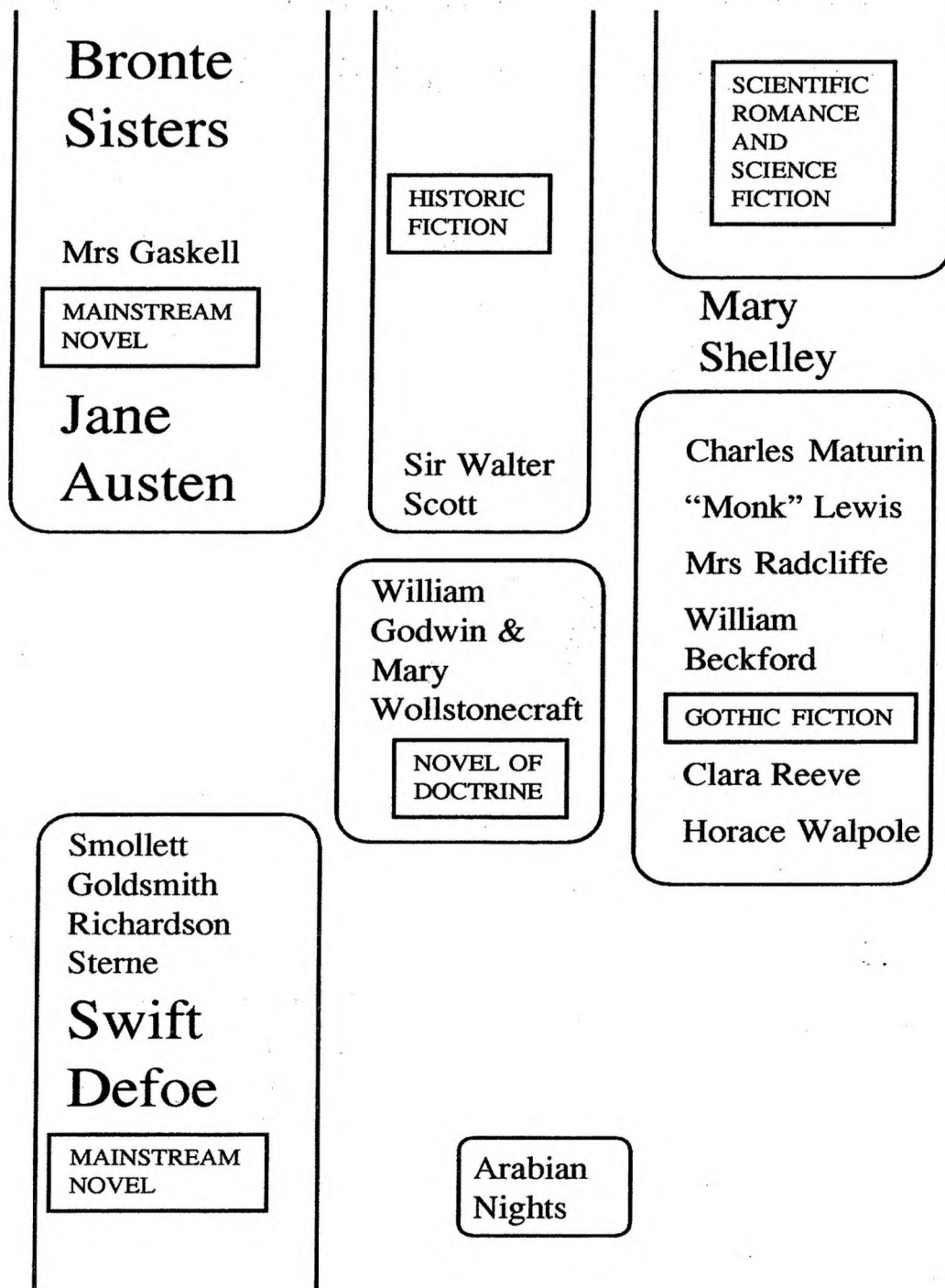


Figure 1.

was soon reprinted, and has in fact been a continuing influence right up to the present day.

Reading *Otranto*, I was struck by the similarity to some of the adventure tales in the *Arabian Nights*. Walpole knew this material – he coined the phrase *Serendipity*, the habit of making happy or chance finds, from *The Three Princes of Serendip* (Serendip is an old name for Sri Lanka or Ceylon,

and actually means *Isle of Silk*). Also in 1757 Walpole had written *A Letter from Xo-Ho, a Chinese Philosopher at London*. Oliver Goldsmith improved on this theme in his book *The Citizen of the World*. Both used a Chinese visitor as a “rational observer”, where people nowadays might use a Martian or a visitor from Canopus. Actual Chinese culture doesn’t come into it.

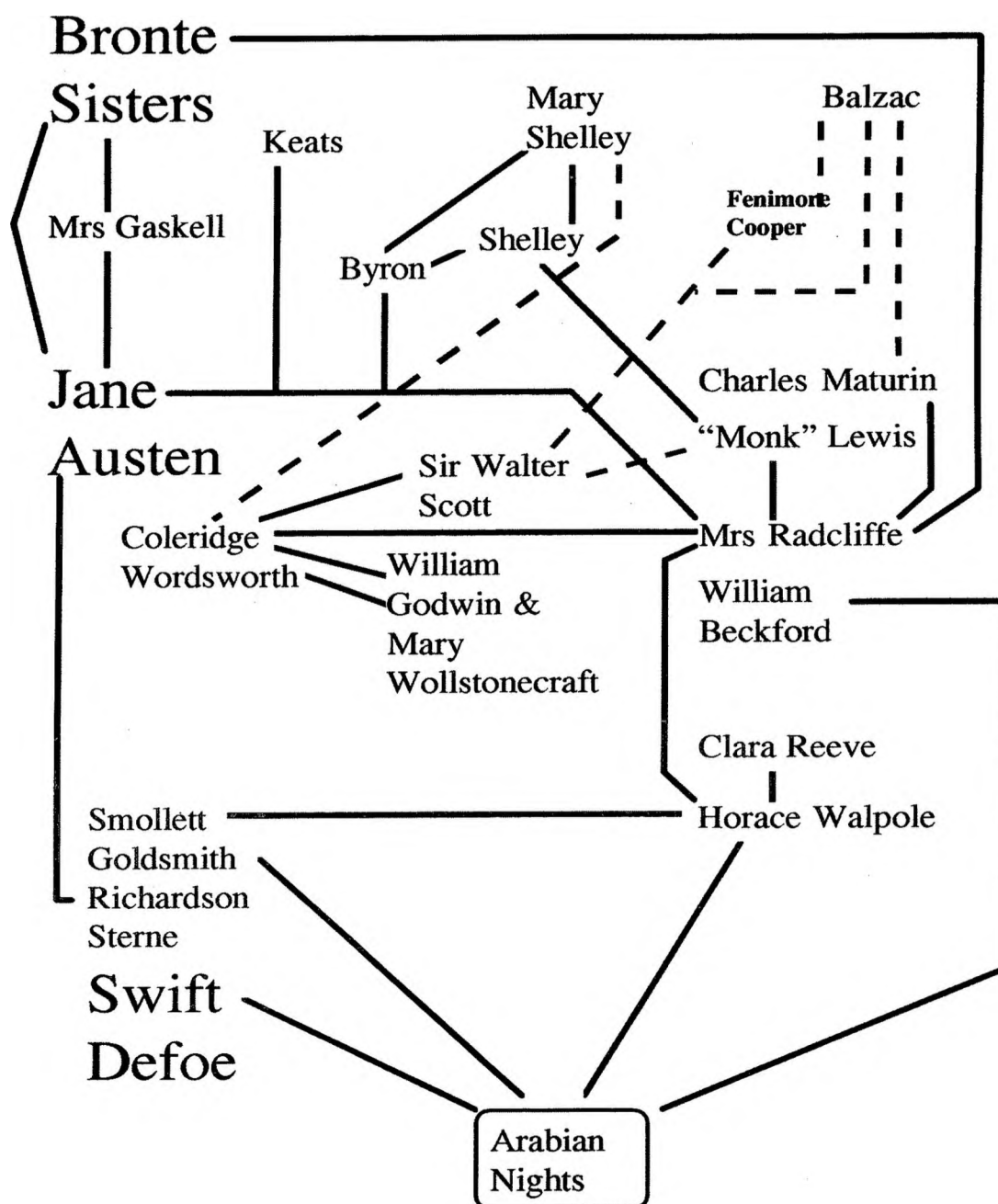


Figure 2.

Arabian Nights' influence goes even wider than that. You must also include Voltaire, influencing and influenced by English thought. His *Zadig*, written in 1747, is not only an oriental romance, but also pioneers the concept of a rational deductive detective – similar to both Sherlock Holmes and Poe's Chevalier Dupin. Poe is sometimes cited as the pioneer, but Voltaire was there more than 100 years earlier, and influenced by the oriental romance. And Smollett wrote

The History and Adventures of an Atom, a parody of contemporary politics set in a fictional past era of Japan, with the narrator being a living and intelligent atom.

Walpole's *Otranto* seems to me to be an interesting hybrid of his two interests – oriental tales and the non-classical or Gothic tradition in Europe. It is a repackaging of the sort of adventure you find in the *Arabian Nights'* style, in the format of what was called the Gothic era, the period between the fall

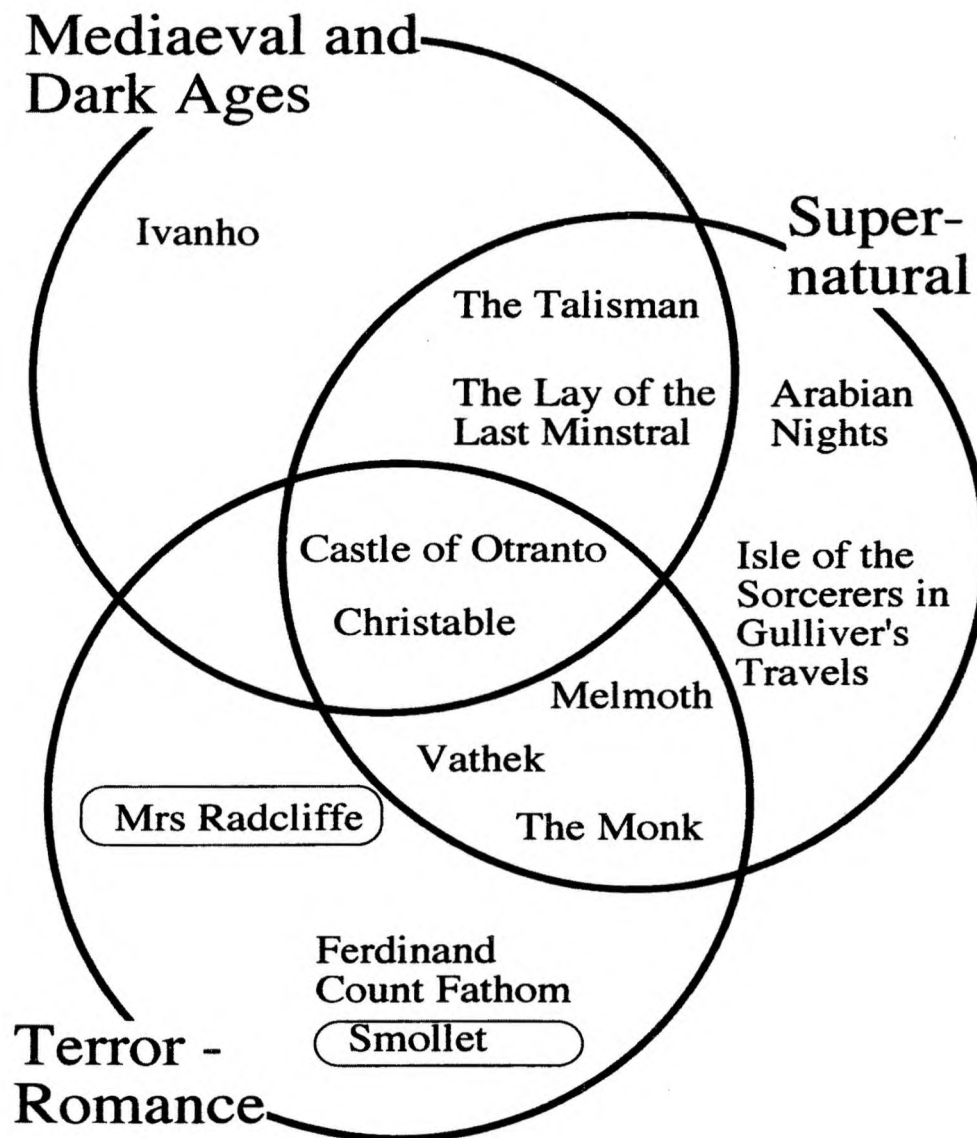


Figure 3.

of Rome and the Renaissance. Gothic is a misleading name, especially for Gothic architecture, which emerged long after the historic Goths had ceased to be a separate people. But it was then the standard term, and at that time had only the same overtones of magic or horror that the word "medieval" has today.

Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* speaks approvingly of England's "Gothic and monkish education", and Burke was the best writer and orator of his day, with an exact knowledge of how every word was likely to affect his audience. Another writer even talks about "the cosy chair beside the Gothic fireplace . . ." This passage is cited in the full *Oxford English Dictionary*, which mentions Walpole's *Otranto* as one of the definitive texts for Gothic as medieval-romance.

It was actually only in the nineteenth century that the word "medieval" was coined and took over much of the

eighteenth-century meaning of "gothic" (with "middleagism" briefly floated as an alternative). And Gothic in the literary context somehow lost its pre-Renaissance roots and became a general term for the terror-romance. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th Edition) (Drabble, 1985) confirms that a shift of meaning occurred, and claims that it happened in the late eighteenth-century. The fourth edition (Harvey, 1967) was less sure about when the shift happened, while the first three editions of the same work seem not to have heard of Gothic literature. Mrs. Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis and the rest are all listed as individuals, but only Walpole is Gothic.

Puzzlingly, the full *Oxford English Dictionary*, which normally gives the first known usage of every word and every meaning of every word, is silent on Gothic in the sense of terror-romance. Only smaller versions of the dictionary mention this usage of Gothic, and with no clue to when this

term came into use.

My own view, based on a lot of reading and checking old sources, is that the term Gothic for terror-romance is relatively recent, late nineteenth-century at the earliest. The first unambiguous case is 1907, and it doesn't really become widespread until the 1960s. I've found this by getting a whole set of old editions of the "Gothic" classics from the British Library and finding just how they were seen when published or republished.

In the process I discovered many other interesting matters, such as that Balzac had a very high opinion of Maturin, and even wrote a sequel to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This work seems never to have been translated into English, and modern editions of both Balzac and Maturin fail to mention the link. Balzac is literature and Maturin is Gothic and if the twain should somehow have met, there is no need to talk about the matter.

Somehow people got hold of the notion that Gothic was the proper term for a particular group of writers, whose work had nothing at all to do with proper literature. But the raw facts suggest that "Gothic" writers, though of no very large literary merit, were very much a part of the literary scene and the literary flow of ideas. They influenced later and better writers who created what we now call "mainstream", and in the nineteenth century this link was generally acknowledged. Confining all of these writers in a Gothic ghetto is a practice that spreads gradually from a few writers – Montague Summers is the best known of them, though I would not call him the best. Anyway, Gothic literature only gradually became established as a fact of literary knowledge, a *genre* that had existed ever since Walpole's day. As they used to say in the Soviet Union, you never know what is going to happen yesterday!

Look at the actual connections (see figure 2) – the material people actually read, the influences they themselves cited. Beckford and *Vathek* influenced Byron, who wrote quite a lot in both the oriental and terror-romantic mode. Byron considered that the best-ever tale of terror is the Biblical story of the Witch of Endor, in which the doomed King Saul confronts the ghost of the prophet Samuel. He even set it in verse:

Is it thou, Oh King? Behold
 Bloodless are those limbs, and cold:
 Such are mine: and such shall be
 Thine, tomorrow, when with me . . .
 Crownless, breathless, headless fall,
 Son and sire, the house of Saul.

This comes from *Hebrew Melodies*, which appeared in 1815 – also the year of the first printed edition of *Beowulf*, as it happens. A lot of Byron's writing is in what we would now call a fantasy or science fiction mode.

I looked for an influence of Walpole on Beckford, or Beckford on Mrs. Radcliffe, and found no mention of any such link. Beckford was influenced by Walpole's notions of architecture, building a gothic mansion that latter fell down. But there is no sign of a *literary* connection. Beckford's *Vathek* is solidly in the tradition of the oriental romance. The so-called Gothic school does not look solid at all. Terror-

romance in English prose writing begins with a chapter in Smollett's *Ferdinand, Count Fathom*, and also includes the Brontë sisters, and all in all is not a *genre* at all.

So where does SF come from? Broadly, the tale of wonder is as old as storytelling itself. In the twentieth century it was denied the stature of serious literature, unless it was by someone really famous like Shakespeare or Swift or Kafka or the Brontë sisters. Some of the rejected literature joined the newly established *genres* of ghost stories and horror stories. The rest crystallised around Gernsback's banner of Science fiction or Scientifiction, for want of anywhere else to go. But in the process SF itself expanded, becoming broader and deeper and more interesting.

Look again at the influence of *The Arabian Nights* – actually a collection of tales from many parts of Asia, with *Cinderella* probably originating in China. It was only in the early eighteenth century that this collection was translated into French, and then into other West European languages. I've speculated about a link from *The Arabian Nights* to Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*. The tales of *Sinbad the Sailor* have more in common with Swift's work than anything else that was around at the time, though Swift was certainly breaking new ground. The links from *The Arabian Nights* to Goldsmith, Smollett, Horace Walpole and William Beckford are not speculative at all. Each of them wrote "Easterns", what we now call *oriental romances*. So too did Byron and Shelley – the paper just didn't have room for any more links. Nor for other authors such as Washington Irving, who are also connected.

You could carry on the *Arabian Nights'* influence right up to the early twentieth century with *Weird Tales*, a mix of oriental romance, tales of imagination and tales of speculative science. The present-day *genre* of science fiction is more like an outgrowth of *Weird Tales* than Gernsback's notion, which was a narrow and technocratic version of what we now call "hard SF".

I said earlier that early SF had a lot in common with the Augustans, and was unlike the later Romantic Novels. There is a basic difference in method. You can write about people living in a spacecraft, or you can write about a spacecraft with people living in it. People in a situation, or a situation described by the people caught up in it. Myself, I like either sort of story when well done. And *Rendezvous with Rama*, a classic work in this second tradition, is by common consent much better than its sequels, which have a lot more about the individual personalities of the visitors.

SF up until the 1960s was generally about deeds, ideas and strange new possible worlds – as indeed are most of the works of the "Augustans", including *Gulliver's Travels*. You have a little bit about Mr. Lemuel Gulliver, and his personal disintegration as he fails to adjust to all of the strangeness he encounters. But this is maybe five or ten percent of the total.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is unambiguously a tale of personal interactions. Her work considers a bogey-man from the bogey-man's point of view. None of the film or television dramatisations really follow her in this, though the 1931 film has a little of it. The personality of the 1931 film monster is interesting, but is quite unlike the intelligent,

well-intentioned and articulate being that Mary Shelley herself devised. But the central point to grasp is that a work that was originally very much in the Romantic tradition has been utterly transformed and brought into line with the "Augustan" tradition that was standard for SF tales in the 1930s. And none of the subsequent dramatizations have been wise enough to undo this change.

The Lord of the Rings itself has elements of both traditions, people in a situation or a situation described by those caught up in it. The two threads of the story, after the breaking of the Fellowship, follow rather different rules. With Frodo, Sam and Gollum, it is the personal interactions that are the prime focus, with various alarms and excursions playing a secondary role. With the other members of the Fellowship, kings and battle and heroic deeds are the prime focus. One might wish to know more about the personalities and private thoughts of people like Denethor, Éowyn, Aragorn and Gandalf. But that would spoil the grand design of the tale, the private ethical struggles of the Ringbearers set against the larger conflict that was going on all around them.

Incidentally, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were well aware of Science Fiction, or rather of "Scientifiction", the original term used by Gernsback. Though Tolkien seems never to have thought of writing a tale of space travel, he could have written a very fine one, much better even than Lewis's. The early parts of the *Notion Club Papers* in *Sauron Defeated* show that he was ahead of the "hard SF" of his day, even at the level of speculations about what the solar system would actually be like. His voyager describes Venus as "a boiling whirl of wind and steam" and Mars as "a horrible network of deserts and chasms" – remarkably good predictions. Tolkien's forecast that the solar system would have no organic life except on Earth also looks very probable, though Mars still has some possibilities, as do some of the outer worlds. But this is a large topic, so I'll cut the matter short for now.

To return to SF in the age of Jane Austen. Aldiss in his *Billion Year Spree* publicised a view of early SF that has become the received standard view – from Gothic, out of Mary Shelley. This view is repeated thirteen years later in his *Trillion Year Spree*, the revised, expanded, but sadly uncorrected reprint of the same work. Though Aldiss is undoubtedly a talented writer of fiction, he is not a useful or a reliable source on factual matters. His *Billion* did at least credit one of the previous exponents of the Gothic-origin theory, in an obscure footnote. His *Trillion* doesn't even have that. Perhaps his ego has undergone a thousand-fold expansion in the intervening years.

But there's also a nasty malignant side to what Aldiss says, which is why I'm fairly direct in criticising him. He is very rude about Tolkien, and very inaccurate. Yet this is preferable to his subtle dirtying of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's name. Aldiss says that when Mary Shelley wrote about the murder of Victor Frankenstein's little brother William, she was fantasising about murdering her own newborn child, who was also called William. He overlooks that Mary also had a younger brother called William, as well as being the daughter of William Godwin (see figure 4). She

herself would have been William had she been born a boy.

Perhaps the fictional murder of Victor Frankenstein's brother expresses some subconscious resentment by Mary for her own younger half-brother William and against the restrictions that were placed on her as English society moved towards the Victorian era. But there is no justification for saying that she felt anything but love for her own little son, a tiny baby at the time, fated not even to live as long as William Frankenstein. One wonders if Aldiss even knows that Mary Shelley had a younger brother. He certainly confuses her half-sister Fanny Imlay with her step-sister Claire Clairmont, speaking of Claire as Mary's half-sister.

Aldiss finds *Frankenstein* similar to Modern SF. But read him carefully and you find that he hasn't clearly distinguished between Mary Shelley's work and the later forms of the myth, particularly the 1930s films. The first of the *Sprees* even describes Victor Frankenstein as a Baron, an odd distinction for a citizen of republican Geneva, particularly since Victor's father is still very much alive.

Scholarly research has discovered five immediate stimuli for *Frankenstein*, in the famous gathering of Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont and Dr. Polidori on the shores of Lake Geneva. These were:

- 1st, a discussion of contemporary scientific notions as to how life might either be created artificially or restored to the dead.
- 2nd, the reading of what Mary Shelley refers to as "*some German ghost stories translated into French*" – actually a book called *Fantasmagoriana* (Eyriès, 1812).
- 3rd, a proposal by Byron that each of those present should write their own ghost story.
- 4th, a reading aloud of Coleridge's then unpublished poem *Christabel*, which Byron had in manuscript form. The malignant witch Geraldine had tricked Christabel into befriending her. While Christabel still suspects nothing, the narrator-voice of the poem has the following description of Geraldine:
Behold! her bosom and half her side –
Hideous, deformed, and pale of hue
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!
The second line was suppressed in the published version of the poem.
- 5th, a waking nightmare that the poem sparked off in Shelley – a woman with eyes where her breasts should be.

You get these details from Dr. Polidori's diary, which Aldiss has obviously not read, or even read a decent summary of. (Dowden's nineteenth-century biography of Shelley, for instance, gives the essence of the matter.) Aldiss seems to rely on Mary Shelley's 1831 introduction to the tale, which is decidedly "economical with the truth". This account suppresses the reading of *Christabel* and Shelley's vision, as well as modestly concealing the fact that Mary was not at that time Percy Shelley's wife – not until later when his rejected first wife committed suicide. The fact that Mary Shelley fails to name the book as *Fantasmagoriana* is

Parents and children in the Godwin household

	Mary Woolstonecraft	Mary Jane Clairmont
Gilbert Imlay	Fanny Imlay	
Unknown		Charles Clairmont
Unknown, probably Swiss		Claire (Jane) Clairmont
William Godwin	Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley	William Godwin Junior

Figure 4.

probably due to a genuine lapse of memory – it seems to be a standard unexceptional work of terror-romance. Anyone interested can find a copy in the British Library, along with an English translation of 1813 called *Tales of the Dead* (Utterson), which seems to have had no influence on anyone.

Aldiss knows nothing of all this. Instead he suggests that the works that inspired the ghost-story composition might have included De Sade's *Justine*. He says "If Mary had read De Sade's novel *Justine*, as seems likely . . ." It's not likely at all. It's not even in line with what Mary Shelley says – De Sade was neither a German nor a writer of ghost stories. And I doubt if even Lord Byron himself would have given any of De Sade's books to young ladies, though he had read them himself.

Incidentally, Murial Spark knows no more than Aldiss about the genesis of *Frankenstein*. She makes much of a family legend that the Godwin children heard Coleridge reciting the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which is indeed mentioned in *Frankenstein*. But the much more substantial link to *Christabel* is ignored. Yet it is most significant.

Coleridge in *Christabel* follows the conventional pattern in having the witch's hidden deformity a sure sign that she's evil. Mary Shelley makes a radical break with this tradition – the hideous artificial man has initial good intentions, and it is only rejection on account of his shocking ugliness that gradually makes him malicious. It has taken more than 150 years for such a perspective to become widespread, with films like *Mask* and *The Elephant Man*. No filmed version of

Frankenstein has included Mary's original insight. The 1931 film gets halfway there, more recent versions don't even manage that.

What of the wider context? Looking at the actual connections, one finds no sharp line between tales of the familiar, tales of the unfamiliar, and tales of wonder. You might say that it's the difference between the man on the Clapham omnibus, the ghost on the Clapham omnibus, the man from Clapham in a spacecraft, or the ghost in a spacecraft, or maybe haunting mysterious Elven ruins. Even the proverbial "man on the Clapham omnibus" is now outdated. To be modern, I suppose one should say "the person in the Clapham traffic jam". In a few years' time, the norm may be "the person on the Clapham electric-powered tram" – or even "the person wandering the radio-active ruins of Clapham." Anyway, I am again wandering off the subject, so I'll cut the matter short.

As well as contributing to *Frankenstein*, *Christabel* was also an inspiration for Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, his first really successful work. Scott had earlier been a literary assistant to "Monk" Lewis, who was at that time much better known, though four years younger than Scott. Lewis and Scott had, among other things, edited a collection called *Tales of Wonder*. But it was thanks to *Christabel* that Scott made his first breakthrough as a writer of narrative poems, allowing his later blossoming as a writer of historical novels.

Frankenstein, the other notable offspring of the virgin *Christabel*, has yet another neglected but important message. It is expressed by Victor Frankenstein at the end of Chapter 4:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity.

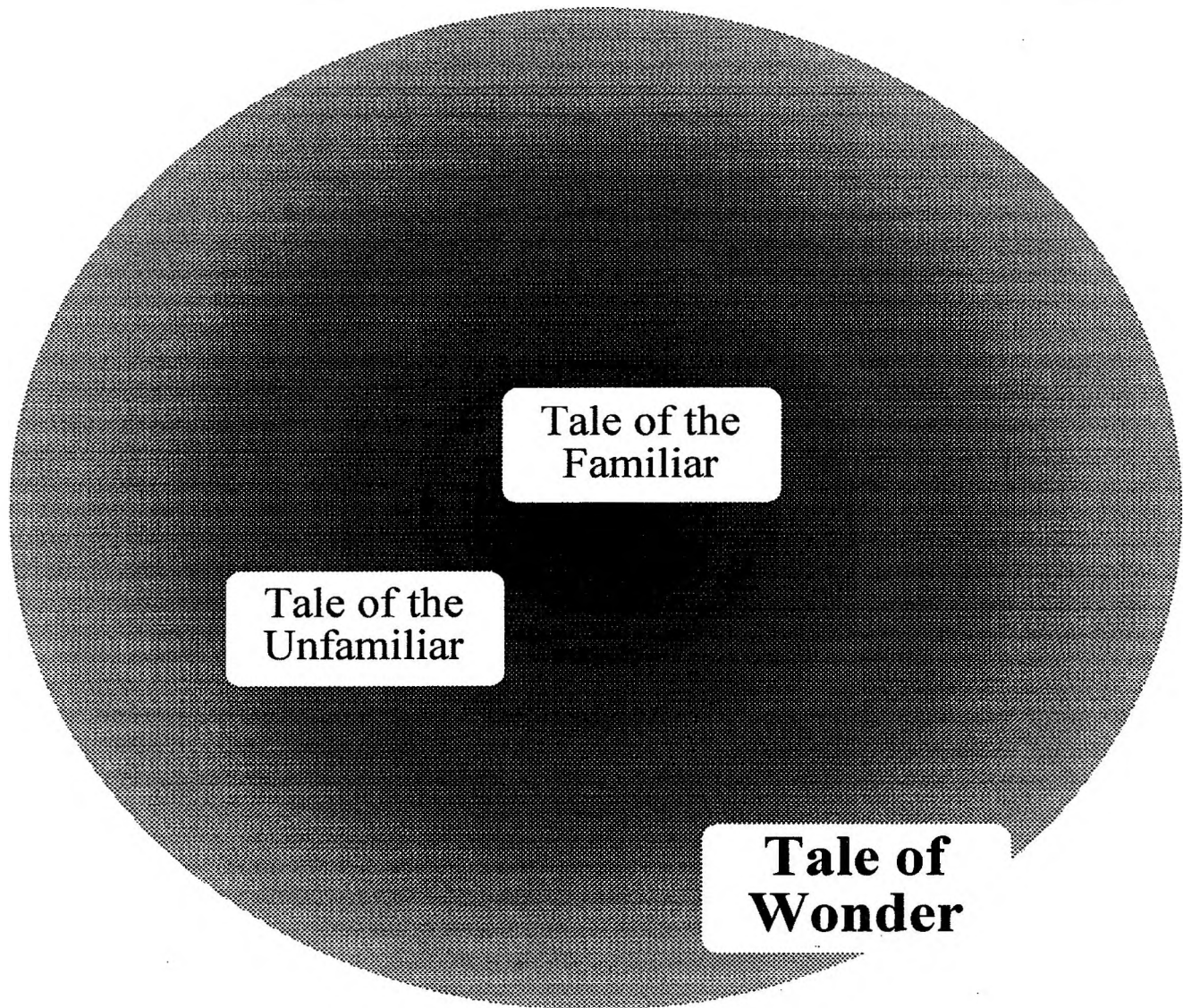


Figure 5.

I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule . . . If this rule were always observed . . . Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed."

Victor Frankenstein recognises in himself an over-ambitious spirit that will do harm wherever it is applied. He does not single out pioneers of science for special blame. He does not ignore the politicians and generals who usually possess much more power and responsibility. Nor does he at any point behave like a scientist. Instead he acts like a magician in modern guise, keeping secret his special knowledge and discoveries, rather than publishing them for the benefit of anyone who may be interested, the scientific method in its proper form.

But none of this got through to the popular version of the myth. Victor has been turned into the prototype "mad scientist", isolated disrupter of an otherwise peaceful and tranquil society. Scientists get the blame for things that are mainly caused by much stronger, nastier and more aggressive social groups. It is of course much safer and easier to pick a fight with scientists than with businessmen, generals, farmers, anglers or fox-hunters.

To take just one instance, scientists are being blamed for the fact that genetic research is recognising some of the genetic factors in disease, which would allow employers and insurance companies to discriminate against such unfortunates. The sensible solution would be to get laws passed outlawing all such forms of discrimination. But that would mean taking on powerful vested interests. Denouncing science is a soft and easy alternative, and the name of "Dr." Frankenstein is often invoked in such a context. A proper understanding of Mary Shelley's original work would be a good corrective, particularly if you realised how different it is from the outlook of most works of Science Fiction and Fantasy. It includes many ideas that the bulk of society is only just now coming to terms with.

To return to the matter of SF origins. As far as I can tell, the idea that *Frankenstein* inspired Wells and the Scientific Romance originated with a man called Ernest A. Baker in his introduction to a 1907 edition of M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*. But in Baker's ten-volume *History of the English Novel*, he refers to "the rather absurd term 'Gothic'", without any explanation of how the term came to be attached to the non-medieval terror-romance. Indeed, he says:

the usual assumption in studies of Gothic is that *The Castle of Otranto* inaugurated the genre which culminated in the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe. But it would be more reasonable to place the starting-point either earlier or later . . . the later Gothic romances were not like Walpole at all.

In Baker's work, Wells is linked to writers like Shaw, Lytton, Butler and Bellamy, rather than to a woman who died fifteen years before he was born.

Devendra P. Varma's book *The Gothic Flame*, often cited as the standard work on Gothic, sheds no light on the matter. He does mention Hans Möbius's 1902 dissertation *The*

Gothic Romance, which is to be found in many of the bibliographies of serious writers on Gothic. It looked interesting, but was very hard to get hold of. I finally persuaded the British Library to borrow the University of Exeter's copy, and discovered that Möbius's work was written in German – a detail that none of those who cite it happen to mention.

Varma also cites Nathan Drake's *Literary Hours* as proof that "Gothic" meant "supernatural" as far back as 1798. Drake does indeed speak of Gothic in a way that sounds very much like the modern concept of Gothic-as-terror. But this is in an essay entitled *On Gothic Superstition* – a point that Varma omits. And Drake also says, "Next to Gothic, in point of sublimity and imagination, comes the Celtic . . ." (Varma, 1957, p. 108). That is to say, he uses the terms "the Gothic" or "the Celtic" to mean *Gothic superstition* or *Celtic superstition*.

Drake's idea of Gothic includes the Icelandic Eddas, the major source for the Norse mythology of Odin, Thor, etc., which is never included in the Gothic-as-terror tradition. He also speaks of Mrs. Radcliffe, but not as a Gothic writer. Instead he calls her "the Shakespeare of Romance Writers".

Mrs. Radcliffe deserves closer study. She is classed as a gothic writer, yet in all her important works the apparent supernatural happenings have some purely natural explanation. Nor was she a hack writer operating in some Gothic ghetto. Rather, she was a major, highly admired and highly influential figure in her own day. She published a *Guide to the Lake District* several years before Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey became famous as the "Lake Poets". When she wrote, hardly anyone had heard of Wordsworth, and Coleridge and Southey had yet to visit that part of the world. Coleridge shows great respect for her when reviewing her "Gothic" novels (which he does not call Gothic). Keats refers to her as "Mother Radcliffe". Byron, who was no respecter of conventional ideas, and who sneered at Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, puts her in very exalted company in his description of Venice in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

And Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller, Shakespeare's art
Has stamp'd her image in me.
(Canto IV. 18)

Mrs. Radcliffe was also a major influence on an unknown aspiring writer named Jane Austen.

To understand Jane Austen, we have to forget about her later fame and consider her in context – a young woman who had some aspirations to be a writer, in a period when Mrs. Radcliffe was both the most successful and the most widely admired role model. What was her picture of the world?

Figure 6, believe it or not, shows Jane Austen's sister's teenage impression of Henry the Fifth. She knew he was a famous soldier, so she imagined him as a soldier of her own era. Her sister's vision of Queen Elizabeth is also very singular. Thankfully, when she came to write novels, she stuck very rigidly to things that she had direct knowledge of.

Most writers feel free to invent scenes and places in the familiar world which they have no direct experience of. Jane Austen was much more strict with her own imagining. For

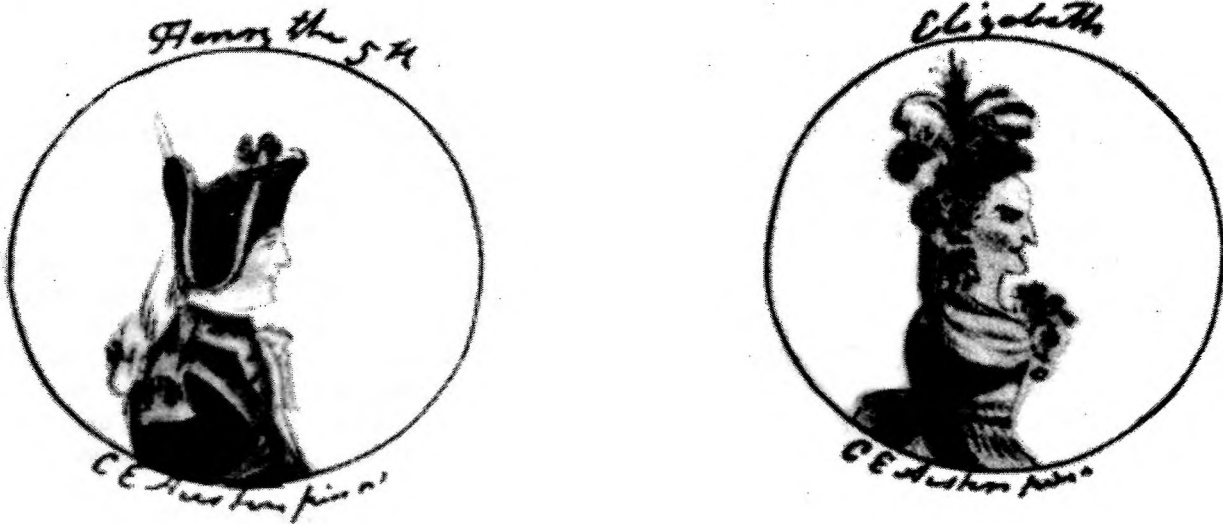


Figure 6. Drawings by Cassandra E. Austen (Austen, 1922, p. 141): (a) Henry V, (b) Elizabeth I

instance she never writes about men talking when no ladies are present, because she would have no direct knowledge of such matters – and it would indeed have been quite different from what the men of that era would say when ladies were present. This is all part of the received standard view of Jane Austen, and I have no wish to disagree with it. I simply want to apply it to *Northanger Abbey*, the novel in which the link to Mrs. Radcliffe and the Terror-Romance is most visible.

I mentioned earlier that the link between Maturin and Balzac has been simply suppressed as an improper connection, turned into a non-fact of modern literature. One would not have expected Jane Austen to be guilty of an improper connection, yet her novel *Northanger Abbey* has a clear and obvious link to Mrs. Radcliffe and the terror-romance.

Northanger Abbey is too famous to become a non-fact. It was one of three novels that Jane Austen was working on for a very long time, with no certainty that they would ever be published. The other members of this trio were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* – all three had various other titles at other times, but to be brief I'll ignore this complication. *Pride and Prejudice* was the first to be offered for publication, but it was rejected. *Northanger Abbey* was purchased by a publisher for £10, but was not then printed or published. *Sense and Sensibility* was the first to actually make it into print, and the publisher may have had some sort of subsidy or guarantee against loss. It was in fact a moderate success, so that *Pride and Prejudice* followed it, as well as other novels like *Mansfield Park*. *Northanger Abbey* was eventually re-purchased from the publisher who had paid £10 for it – since all of these works were anonymous, he had no idea that it was by a successful novelist. Jane Austen finally prepared it for a belated publication, with a note about the delay. It actually only appeared after her death, in 1818, the same year as *Frankenstein*.

Northanger Abbey is commonly described as a parody of Gothic. Some people even claim that it was suppressed

because it might harm sales of the more popular Gothic tales. Yet parodies were common at the time, including *Christabess*, a vicious but clever parody of *Christabel*. And *Northanger Abbey* is not a parody. No one knows why it was not published after being purchased, but the publisher may have had second thoughts and refused to risk several hundred pounds printing and distributing a book that might not sell well. (This was in an age when a middle-class family could get by on an income of £200 a year.)

In *Northanger Abbey*, we have the tale of a young woman making a small entry into the fashionable society of early nineteenth-century Bath. The framework is a conventional tale of a true romance, with an unfortunate misunderstanding that spoils things and a final resolution with a happy marriage. The interesting part is that while all of this is happening, the heroine Catherine is imagining all sorts of things based on her reading of Mrs. Radcliffe and other writers of terror-romances. (One of these fantasies, incidentally, is about an imprisoned wife – surprisingly similar to the later plot of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.)

The narrator-voice of *Northanger Abbey* notes the ironic contrast between the silly terror-romance fantasies of the heroine and the cynical plotting that is actually controlling her fate. The difference between romance and reality is sharply pointed out. During Catherine's first trip to Bath, it is noted that "neither robbers not tempests befriended them, not one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero". The resolution and the happy ending are combined with a realisation that terror-romance happenings are mere fantasies, at least in the context of early nineteenth-century England. Catherine's imagination comes into line with the actual world she lives in.

From where did Jane Austen get this ingenious idea? Note that she hardly ever worked without some real-life model – even some minor works of terror-romance mentioned in passing are real books. Also that the external aspects of Catherine's adventures are rather closer to Jane Austen's

own life than the deeds of her other fictional heroines.

Is it not a reasonable hypothesis that the accounts of Catherine's terror-romantic imaginings are a slightly comical account of Jane Austen's own vivid imagination of her younger days? Might she not be making use of fantasies that she herself had had when she was Catherine's age and trying to make her way in the world, still hoping to get married and not resigned to being a spinster and novelist instead? Because for her, there was no happy resolution at a personal level. Instead she resolved and united two aspects of literature that had grown far apart: the rich emotional life of

the terror-romantic fantasy with the realistic but limited framework of the Augustan novel of everyday life.

This unexpected influence on Jane Austen may have been Mrs. Radcliffe's main contribution to the development of the novel. Her popularity declined, though Henry James knew of her, and makes an oblique reference in *The Turn of the Screw*. Despite this, she ended up shut up in a Gothic ghetto, given a spurious link to Science Fiction, which she really had nothing to do with. Science Fiction in its "Golden Age" form comes from Swift via Wells, while the legacy of Mary Shelley remains to be developed in its full and proper form.

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